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How West, Soviets Acted to Defuse S. African A-Test

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In the midafternoon on Saturday, Aug. 6, the acting chief of the Soviet embassy, Vladillen M. Vasev, called at the White House with an urgent personal message from Leonid I. Brezhnev to Jimmy Carter. South Africa, according to Soviet intelligence, was secretly preparing to detonate an atomic explosion in its Kalahari Desert. Brezhnev asked for Carter's help to stop it.

The Brezhnev message, still in its original Russian, enclosed the text of an announcement scheduled to be made public two days later by Tass, the Soviet news agency, reporting South Africa's preparations. There was no reference in either document to the Russian spy-in-the-sky satellite photographs that played a key role in Moscow's alarm.

The Soviet diplomat told William G. Hyland, the senior National Security Council officer on duty on that quiet afternoon, that Brezhnev planned to send similar appeals for action to the leaders of Britain, France and West Germany. In the Soviet view, failure to head off a South African atomic explosion "would have the most serious and far-reaching aftermaths for international peace and security."

In the two weeks that followed, the United States, the Soviet Union and the three European governments engaged in an extraordinary collaboration intended to spare mankind from another fateful step toward the spread of atomic weapons.

Last Tuesday, 17 days after receipt of the Soviet note, Carter was able to announce at his press conference that South Africa had promised that "no nuclear explosive test will be taken . . . now or in the future."

For the first time since the dawn of the nuclear age in a blinding flash over Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945—32 years to the day from Brezhnev's message—the world's leading powers, east and west, worked in concert to back away a lesser nation from the threshold of entry into the nuclear weapons club. If this cooperation can be buttressed and extended—and if timely warning through intelligence is available in the future—what happened without much public notice in these past weeks may set a pattern of historic importance.

Despite South Africa's denials that any nuclear test was ever planned, informed U.S. officials believe the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. Clear and detailed U.S. reconnaissance satellite photographs, ordered by the White House within hours of the Brezhnev note, showed construction in the desert that experts said was typical of a nuclear test site. In the absence of the outside pressures, administration experts said, South Africa might have gone on to detonate a bomb there within a matter of weeks, assuming that the explosive material was in hand and that it chose to move full speed ahead.

Some American intelligence specialists, dissenting from the administration consensus, suspect that the construction in the Kalahari Desert was an elaborate sham intended not for an explosion but for the shock value of its certain discovery on the great powers. By this interpretation, white South Africa intended to dramatize at minimal cost its claim to be a nation of major capabilities which will not permit outsiders' versions of racial equality to be shoved down its throat.

The hoax theory is heavily discounted inside the Carter administration, which believes that the Kalahari preparations were real. In view of the nuclear sophistication of South Africa, the Carter administration concluded that what was being built could be used. All U.S. planning proceeded on that premise.

If South Africa had set off an atomic device, the shock waves could have reverberated with even greater force than India's May, 1974, explosion which shook the major nuclear supplier nations into belated cooperative efforts to stop the spread of dangerous materials and technology. This drive to head off a nuclear-armed world, centered on periodic semi-secret meetings in London, would have been gravely set back and its future cast in doubt—especially because South Africa possesses abundant deposits of natural uranium. If it could process and enrich enough uranium to make its own bomb, it potentially could export weapons-grade material to other countries.

In African terms, Pretoria's detonation of a bomb would have been a signal of defiance with profound impact on the American-British effort to forestall widespread racial warfare in southern Africa. And it would have been a stunning rebuff to President Carter's policy of direct, explicit pressure on South Africa to abandon its internal racial policy of apartheid.

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